

“The one who bears the sore of leprosy shall keep his garments rent and his head bare, and shall muffle his beard; he shall cry out, 'Unclean, unclean!' As long as the sore is on him he shall declare himself unclean, since he is in fact unclean. He shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp.”

Leprosy is a contagious disease, which attacks the nerve cells in the person infected by it, leading to a loss of feeling and sensation. Contrary to the popular imagination, leprosy does not cause people’s limbs to fall off, yet the injuries and infections that can develop, which are allowed to fester because the person infected with leprosy lacks any feeling or pain sensations, lead to grave bodily disfigurements and eventually death.

To protect the health of Israelite society, that is to promote the common good of his people, Moses enacts the law we heard about in today’s first reading. Though it promotes the common good of society, it asks those with leprosy to carry a heavy cross; misery, physical, emotional pain, loneliness and isolation of those who contracted the disease often were the unintended, yet very real effects of this law – the movie *Ben-Hur* captures this very well.

When Jesus encounters the Leper in today’s Gospel, he does not challenge the law of Moses (as he did with so many other laws - such as the Sabbath laws or laws governing which foods they can eat); rather, he breaks through the secondary effect of this law, the unintended consequences of this law. He removes the personal cost of the disease by taking the cross from the shoulders of this man – reaching out his hand and touching the Leper – an unthinkable thing for him to do – a great act of love for him to do. And in doing this he shattered the isolation, stigma, and fear of this man before he healed him.

In our society today, we have many laws which are designed to promote the common good, yet which entail a personal cost or ask people to bear a cross. Assessment taxes for school districts are a good example – a retired couple who has never sent children to Mounds View High School or Irondale High School is never-the-less expected to pay property taxes in order to support these schools even though they themselves may never benefit. This personal sacrifice and cost is borne because it promotes the common good of society. To prevent people from inhaling second-hand smoke, our society has enacted laws which require smokers to smoke outside, despite the harsh winter.

We also have men and women serving in our armed forces who give a portion of their lives (sometimes even losing their life) so that the common good of our nation’s defense might be promoted for all of the citizens of our country. Their pursuit of the common good asks them to shoulder a great cross in their lives and in the lives of their families.

In another instance that looks similar, but is actually a little different, we have laws governing marriage. In our state and country, we have a set of laws which are designed to promote the common good by encouraging healthy marriages according to the Christians understanding of marriage. Though, the union of husband and wife in the bond of marriage is first and foremost a reality of our faith that pre-exists any current government in this world, civil governments have seen how the institution of marriage has served civilization so well (for thousands of years) that many of them have sought to promote this unique union by enacting laws which seek to foster healthy marriages based upon our Judeo-Christian understanding of marriage.

Though looking at marriage from a very different perspective than people of faith, civil governments have seen that the institution of marriage benefits the common good of society because it ensures that the one responsible for siring a child helps the mother in raising and providing for that child. Governments have seen that the institution of marriage benefits the common good of society by providing the next generation of citizens for their countries – indeed a society without children is a society without hope heading towards extinction within one generation. Governments have seen that marriage promotes the common good of their societies by seeing that children are healthiest and grow the best with the love of both a mother and a father. Thus, for all these reasons and many more, governments throughout the world and throughout time have enacted laws which promote the Judeo-Christian institution of marriage.

Not only do healthy marriages between a man and woman ordered toward children promote the common good of society; there is no personal cost, there is no cross that other people in society are asked to bear when the state supports and promotes the Judeo-Christian

understanding of marriage – healthy marriages and families benefit society as a whole at no cost to society. And for thousands of years that has been the case; however, within the last 20 years or so, people with same-sex attraction feel that they are discriminated against by these laws.

The sad reality is that some of our brothers and sisters, because they have same-sex attraction, have been made to feel like lepers within the history of our country. They have been ostracized, isolated, and been driven to physical and emotional pain through discrimination and hatred. We must acknowledge this sad reality and we must agree that hatred and discrimination cannot be tolerated.

Yet, the answer to the injustice perpetrated against our brothers and sisters with same-sex attraction is not to redefine marriage as some have proposed and advanced – as if changing the meaning of a word has the power to change the underlying realities of that word – it does not, it cannot, and to pretend that it does solves no problems. Marriage is a unique relationship, a unique reality, and there are plenty of other relationships within our culture that we do not call marriage; the close relationship between good friends, the relationships between parents and children, friendship between cousins, or polygamous relationships. It is not discrimination to not recognize any of these as marriages.

Marriage is a biological, physiological, and (yes for people of faith) a sacramental reality that cannot be as easily redefined as they propose; rather, the real, the honest answer is to see that our brothers and sisters do not suffer real discrimination or hatred.

Our brothers and sisters with same-sex attraction need to be treated with love and respect, and our state and our country have come a long way in ensuring that there are avenues within current state law that ensures that their rights are not violated. The Catholic Church has a great ministry to our brothers and sisters with same-sex attraction – Courage Ministry, which walks with them and their families. If our children, grandchildren, aunts, uncles, or friends struggle with same-sex attraction, then we support them, love them, and call them forward in Christian discipleship.

When the common good asks us, or those around us, to bear a cross or when the common good exacts a personal cost, the answer is not to weaken those things which promote the common good.

When the Leper came to Christ, Christ knew that he could not change the laws regarding leprosy, yet he knew that he could stretch out his hand and shatter the isolation and loneliness of this man. When our brothers and sisters in the military come home wounded and broken, we know that there are times when our nation must go to war, yet we also reach out our hands and love our soldiers who carry such a heavy cross, we care for them, and assist them in any way we can. When we benefit from a good public education, we seek to apply the skills we learned for the betterment of society. When the Church looks at and sees our brothers and sisters struggling with same-sex attraction, we know we cannot change the laws regarding marriage, we encourage them to live chastely, as we do with all other un-married people, yet must also stretch out our hands, shatter the loneliness and isolation, and love them – we help them carry the cross in their lives, helping them realize their true dignity and identity as beloved sons and daughters of God.